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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the common issues with which a Chinese school in the United States may be struggling and new opportunities on which the education system and society can capitalize. Most children in Chinese schools experience language shifts from Chinese to English and then to Chinese as a second language. They may experience substractive instead of additive bilingualism, and they suffer a big gap between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. The mismatch between students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles is another source of conflict. Conflict also occurs in the home environment when older students begin to question why they must attend a Chinese language school, usually on a Saturday or Sunday. Degree of proficiency level and literacy and the balance between oral and reading/writing are questions that the school must balance. More importantly, Chinese schools offer not only language, but socio-cultural continuity for parents as well as students; a sort of extended cultural family home. Cooperation between the Chinese schools and regular schools would foster closer ties between both areas and establish the possibility of sharing and exchanging resources and cultural information, especially as many Chinese School teachers are not certified teachers, often because of strigent requirements of teacher certification. A national or regional teacher training institute is of fundamental importance. A high quality program would raise standards. (Contains one reference) (NAV)

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CHINESE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS:

THE ISSUES AND THE NEW DIRECTIONS

Shu-han Chou Wang

INTRODUCTION

This paper was originally presented at the 1995 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. In particular it talks about the common issues with which a Chinese school is struggling and the new opportunities on which all of us, the education system and society-at-large, can capitalize.

THE ISSUES OF BILINGUALISM OF CHINESE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

When people discuss teaching in a Chinese school, they often do not pay enough attention to the bilingualism of the children. The fact is that most children at the Chinese school experience language shifts from Chinese to English and then to Chinese as a second language. They may experience subtractive instead of additive bilingualism, and they suffer a big gap between basic interpersonal communicative skills (the BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (the CALP) (Cummins, 1981). Their study at the Chinese schools may lack clear objectives and motivation. Besides, there is the problem of inadequate teaching materials. Because the structure of the school requires a child to start at an early age, it may not accommodate his need to enter or re-enter the program later on. The mismatch between students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles is another source of conflict.

The problems are even more complex if we examine the Chinese schools from a socio-linguistic and psychological point of view. While the younger children seldom

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question it, the adolescents begin to ask why they have to go to the Chinese schools. The conflicts between the home and mainstream cultures are real; the re-evaluation of themselves and their surroundings is often very painful. In the case of Chinese schools for these children, bilingualism and biculturalism are thrust upon them. Studying Chinese is a must for them, but what is the price that these children have to pay?

First, children have to sacrifice Saturday mornings or Sunday afternoons to go to the Chinese school. Not many children enjoy that, especially when the school is synonymous with many tests and homework. Second, Chinese language requires extensive memorization and drudgery to build literacy. Coupled with the different mentality and approaches of the teachers and school, the rewards of learning do not seem to justify the pains. Third, the children feel that parental expectations is unrealistically high. By sending their children to Chinese schools, the parents want them to maintain contact with their roots. However, they also suffer the anxiety over the expected degree of bilingualism for their children. In other words, they expect the children to acquire English as native speakers, yet they insist that they only require the children to know basic Chinese. For example, one of the surveys we conducted at the Chinese School of Delaware showed that parents said they would be satisfied if the children could speak Chinese with any native speaker, could understand Chinese movies or TV news, and could read Chinese newspaper or magazines. Is this basic Chinese?

In 1994 the College Board began offering the SAT II Chinese Achievement Test. Suddenly every community Chinese school throughout the country hustled to help students obtain high scores on the test. Unfortunately and inevitably, this would mean that Chinese-American children have another goal to achieve. Need I say more?

On the other end of the spectrum, a Chinese school often faces an ideological struggle: that is, what is the ideal level of proficiency and literacy or the balance between oral proficiency and reading-writing literacy?

All this suggests that the Chinese schools are a gold mine for researchers. For example, we need research to help us improve our methodology and teaching. We are eager to expand our knowledge in current pedagogy, assessment, and state-of-the art technology. We would also like to familiarize ourselves with available textbooks and curriculum design. Research in the area of self-concept and the mental health of Chinese-American children is urgently needed, so are studies on the learner characteristics and motivations. In short, it is our goal to make Chinese school a happy and memorable learning experience for the children.

RECOGNIZING CHINESE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

If we have done a good job of describing the issues that the Chinese Schools face, some of you may ask: "If Chinese schools are faced with so many problems, why don't you simply dissolve them?"

My answer to this is that Chinese Schools will be here for a long time. First of all, Chinese is still not a foreign language commonly offered in regular schools. As long as parents have no alternative, they will continue sending their children to Chinese schools.

A more compelling reason is that the Chinese school performs a larger role in these immigrants' lives than language teaching or learning alone. It fulfills the need to socialize regularly with people of their own ethnic background. The earlier immigrants had "An-Liang Gong Hui" (An-Liang Chamber of Commerce) or "Taishan Tongxianghui" (Taishan Homeland Society) to turn to for friendship or even political protection. After 1965 the later immigrants invented "the Chinese school." How many banquets or dance parties can you give or go to without feeling bored and wasteful? What else could be more legitimate and important than to teach the children their home language and culture? An interesting aspect is that parents are not the only ones feeling the need for socializing. If you ask any child why he comes to Chinese school, an answer besides "my parents send me here" would probably be "I can see my

friends here." The Chinese school has become an extended family. If we should abolish all Chinese schools today, the result would be devastating.

Amazingly with so many odds against them, Chinese schools have survived and become even more popular, despite the fact that their many contributions are often overlooked. For instance, Chinese schools serve as a model of what the community and parents can achieve once they pool their resources. Although most of us are amateurs, we are able to successfully set up and run a school with different levels and programs. Our graduates who continue their study in colleges and universities are proof of our accomplishment.

Furthermore, putting aside the complaints and problems mentioned above, Chinese schools do help the children learn their language and culture. If there were no Chinese schools, how many parents could consistently and systematically teach their children Chinese over a period of 10 to 12 years? Not only that, could they teach them the Chinese language, history, geography, arts and crafts, singing, dancing, Chinese Martial Arts, cooking, calligraphy, and Chinese brush painting? The variety of programs indicates that Chinese schools are both linguistic and cultural resources. Even though most teachers there are not professionally trained, they are well-educated, creative, and most important of all, dedicated. Since the national language policy has changed and there is an increased effort to promote Chinese, the important question for the educational institutions now is whether they can build Chinese programs based on the infra-structure already established by the Chinese schools.

CAPITALIZING ON THE WEALTH OF CHINESE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Three years ago I applied for and obtained Carnegie Credit Units for the high school students of the Chinese School of Delaware. As a result, my school district, Red Clay Consolidated School District, had also invited the Chinese School of Delaware to be a partner and establish a Chinese language program at John Dickinson High School. Today the program has been expanded to include two other schools. Based on my

experience, I feel the states and the local school districts can cooperate with the Chinese schools in the following ways:

First, they may consider accrediting Chinese schools and giving credits to any high school students who study there; the Chinese schools, in turn, must open their doors to students whose ethnic backgrounds are not Chinese. Thus many more students may study Chinese even if there are no Chinese courses available in regular schools. This is the most effective short-term solution to the promotion of the less commonly taught languages. By incorporating the heritage schools into the mainstream curriculum, a state or local school district could solve the immediate problems related to the shortage of funding, certified teachers, and scheduled class time.

Other possibilities, if the resources and needs for it exist, include inviting a Chinese school as a partner to establish a Chinese-English bilingual program. Or there could be after-school clubs or classes in which students might learn either the language, culture, or a combination of both. Chinese summer camps are already popular attractions. Another model involves pairing a Chinese school teacher, as an assistant or paraprofessional if she is not certified, with a certified Social Studies teacher. The former teaches the Chinese language, and the latter the culture. Any of these programs can generate much interest among prospective students. Once they are visible and accessible to all students in the community, the public might demand a formal Chinese class as a foreign language course.

Whether we are talking about improving Chinese schools or incorporating Chinese programs into the mainstream curriculum, teacher certification is the most crucial and important issue . Two years ago I was fortunate to participate in the Chinese Teacher Training Institute funded through the Critical Languages and Area Studies Consortium and taught by the faculty of the School for International Training-- now known as World Learning. As a beneficiary of the training, I should like to see similar institutes continue to be offered. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of teacher training programs. Without certified teachers the establishment of the

Chinese language courses in regular schools is out of the question as is the issues of expanding the existing programs.

As I mentioned earlier, most teachers in Chinese schools are native speakers of Chinese, although usually of varied backgrounds. They need training in language teaching theories and pedagogy. In addition the bilingualism and biculturalism of these teachers are essential. An understanding of how the American educational system works is indispensable. The teaching and promotion of the Chinese language and culture takes place in the social and political contexts of this country.

The stringent requirements of teacher certification often prevent a qualified and dedicated would-be teachers from reaching their goal. Additionally these interested teachers are scattered about the country. A national or regional teacher training institute is, therefore, of fundamental importance because it can help these teachers meet the certification requirements. A high quality program will also raise standards. I hope various professional organizations such as the Chinese Language Teacher's Association (CLTA), the Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools (CLASS), the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC), the Center for the Teaching of Chinese in Secondary Schools at Princeton, the National Council and the Association of Chinese Schools, and other foundations will work together to tackle this task of teacher training.

I should also like to request that future teacher training institutes be open to teachers of Chinese heritage schools. Unfortunately many institutes require applicants to be "practicing teachers." While it is important for practicing teachers to have opportunities for professional development, it is equally important to train "NEW" or "PROSPECTIVE" teachers and help them become certified. Without these new troops, we cannot put more Chinese programs in the field.

Finally we must take a critical look at the issues of articulation. Over the past decades the graduates of the Chinese schools have been called "false beginners," a term that is now out of fashion because of its negative connotation. (It is as if it is their

already knowing some Chinese disturbs the whole curriculum.) According to an informal survey conducted in 1994 by the National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools, there are about 65,000 students studying at the Chinese schools nationwide. When these students continue their study of Chinese in high schools or colleges, there is pressure to better service their needs. Since these children have developed a certain degree of oral proficiency and literacy, their interest and abilities are very different from those students who study Chinese as a foreign language. When we talk about equity and opportunity, we cannot ignore the needs of these students. More collaboration among the Chinese schools, the pre-collegiate schools, and colleges is imperative in order to improve the articulation between programs.

The Chinese community schools, in particular, need to keep up with research in the area of second language acquisition, self-concept, and ethno-linguistic studies to improve their pedagogy. They must familiarize themselves with such matters as how the educational system operates, what the current educational reform is, the development of teaching materials and content and assessment standards, and the state-of-the-art technology. Active participation in professional conferences and workshops is indispensable in acquiring new information, sharing available resources, and building bridges with the professionals.

CONCLUSION

In closing, my presentation has taken us on a tour of Chinese schools as seen from within as well as from without. I have analyzed the different issues faced by the Chinese schools and have discussed many contributions of Chinese schools to education and to society-at-large. Most importantly I have described what kind of collaboration is possible between Chinese schools and regular schools. In pursuing these new directions, both Chinese schools and the mainstream educational system will be better able to serve the needs of our future generations.

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